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SUBJECT: The Diwaniya: A Defining Element of Kuwaiti Culture

¶1. Introduction: Post reporting often refers to "diwaniya" visits, important sources for information on domestic and international developments. Most readers recognize the diwaniya as an uniquely Kuwaiti political, social, and cultural institution, but what exactly is a diwaniya and what role does it play in Kuwait? LES Political Specialist has visited diwaniyas with Ambassadors and Embassy officers for almost 20 years. He compiled this overview for those who have not been fortunate enough to enjoy Kuwaiti hospitality.

Defining Diwaniya

¶2. Diwaniya is widely heard in Kuwaiti vernacular: "See you at the Diwaniya," "When are you going to the Diwaniya?" or "Today, we will complete our discussion at the Diwaniya". What is the origin of the word diwaniya? Most immediately associate the word as the root for the English word "divan," or think of the several Arabic definitions referring to councils, secretariats, and other office functions. According to the abridged Kuwaiti encyclopedia, the diwaniya "is that part of the house where men usually meet to discuss the affairs of their lives be it [pearl] diving or travel and associated memories; trade and its profits; and construction-related matters."

¶3. But the Kuwaiti diwaniya is more than a place, it is a tradition engrained in Kuwaiti society. Historically the diwaniya is viewed as a social institution identified with the family owning it and was limited to a certain class of merchants and the well-to-do. Kuwait's first diwaniya was that of its first ruler, Shaykh Sabah I, and founded in 1756. Several other historically relevant diwaniyas are also associated with prominent Kuwaiti families or tribes: Al-Khrافي Diwan (family of the current Speaker of Parliament Jassem Al-Khorafi); Al-Naqeeb Diwan; Bourosli Diwan; Al-Othman Diwan; Al-Ghanem Diwan; Al-Jassar Diwan; Al-Sabih Diwan; Al-Bader Diwan; Al-Bahar Diwan; Al-Sager Diwan; Al-Adasani Diwan; Ma'rafi Diwan; Al-Roumi Diwan; Al-As'ousi Diwan; and Al-Shaye Diwan.

A Bridge between the Classes

¶4. The traditional Kuwaiti diwaniya played a significant role in Kuwaiti society. While traditionally, holding a diwaniya was reserved for the upper classes and enhanced the host's social status, underprivileged Kuwaitis frequented diwaniyas, fostering unity among Kuwait's social classes. The diwaniya was a place where people from all walks of life met to exchange congratulations on holidays and for marriage ceremonies, as well as to receive condolences. Traditional diwaniyas also hosted Iftar banquets for the poor and the needy during Ramadan, and the first hospital in Kuwait was hosted by a diwaniya.

Political Origins of the Diwaniya

¶5. The traditional Kuwaiti diwaniya also had an important political role. The diwaniya was where senior Kuwaitis endorsed the first ruler of Kuwait and where consultations and decisions on the affairs of state occurred. It was also the venue for the debates on creating the first Shura (consultation) Council at the beginning of the rule of Shaykh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in 1921. Diwaniyas hosted meetings to identify the names of voters for the election of the Legislative Councils in 1938 and 1939, and further served as

polling stations and ballot-counting locations.

The Diwaniya as a Cultural Center

16. The role of the diwaniya transcended political life. It was a cultural base and means for transmitting information before the development of modern media as well. The diwaniya was an intellectual forum where people discussed various issues about Kuwait including cultural and literary matters, as well as a meeting place for men of letters, scholars, poets and politicians. Contributions and donations for building the first regular school in Kuwait were made at a diwaniya. The first Kuwaiti library was established in a diwaniya. Additionally, the diwaniya was once the sole place for listening to radio and following news as only the wealthy were able to provide such services.

The Effect of the Oil Boom

17. The 1936 discovery of oil and its export changed the trajectory of Kuwait. The economic boom and subsequent social changes promoted greater hospitality, facilitated receiving numerous guests, and gave rise to the spread of diwaniyas. While traditional diwaniyas still existed, widespread economic prosperity allowed anyone who wanted to open a diwaniya to do so. As a result, the diwaniya concept changed with the social, economic, and cultural changes Kuwait experienced, such as increased material abundance; architectural changes in the construction of Kuwaiti houses allowing space for diwaniyas; support from the government in the form of frequent visits to diwaniyas by State officials, ministers and decision-makers; achievement by diwaniyas of some political, social and economic gains; a limited number of entertainment venues; and a cultural preference to have a gathering place for men apart from women. These factors have dramatically contributed to the increase in the number of Diwaniyas, making it no longer limited to a specific social class, but rather an institution shared by the majority of Kuwaiti society.

The Modern Diwaniya

18. Today, according to historian Khaled Al-Mughamis, the diwaniya is "like a club incorporating a group of people who form a small society, where they discuss their life affairs such as living conditions, trade, politics, and intellectual matters." In addition, diwaniyas can be a place for "playing cards, singing, serving banquets and talking about various aspects of life in addition to taking advantage of 'Wasta' (influence)." There are now thousands of diwaniyas which generally can be grouped in the following categories:

- a) Traditional diwaniyas which are associated with the name of the owning family and are considered a historic extension of the original Kuwaiti diwaniyas.
- b) MP's diwaniyas where Members of Parliament meet their constituents to review legislative updates and to resolve constituent problems.
- c) Youth diwaniyas where young men pass the time. These diwaniyas are unique because they are open daily and extremely informal in nature.
- d) Entertainment diwaniyas where people meet for leisure activities such as playing cards and other games.
- e) Neighborhood or "open air" diwaniyas where the owner of the house puts a carpet and several wooden chairs outside of his home and invites his neighbors to sit and talk.
- f) Kinship diwaniyas where male relatives meet weekly. Members of the same family historically lived near one another, but are now more typically resident in various neighborhoods throughout the capital and its suburbs.
- g) Religious diwaniyas which feature lecturers who deliver sermons or religious instruction.

h) Political diwaniyas created to achieve political goals and promote political - liberal or conservative - ideas.

i) Social diwaniyas which are mostly casual, opening their doors on social occasions such as feasts, weddings, and other celebrations; during the holy month of Ramadan; and for receiving condolences.

j) Educational Diwaniyas or "literary salons" where officials, scholars, or intellectuals gather for lectures.

k) Specialists diwaniyas whose members share a profession such as the Faculty Diwaniya, Engineers' Diwaniya, or Physicians' Diwaniya.

l) Craftsmen and Amateur diwaniyas for those who share a certain craft or a specific hobby, such as the Fishermen Diwaniya and Ship Builders Diwaniya.

m) NGOs diwaniyas located inside governmental centers and institutions and which are subsidized by the Government such as sports club diwaniyas and co-ops (neighborhood shopping centers) diwaniyas.

n) Kuwaiti diwaniyas abroad for students, expatriates, and vacationing Kuwaitis.

o) Shared or joint diwaniyas for frequenters of both genders. Among the most famous of these are the diwaniya of Higher Education Undersecretary Dr. Rasha Al-Sabah, cousin of the Amir and Prime Minister, and the diwaniya of former diplomat Mohammed Al-Qadiri and his wife prominent artist Thuraya Al-Baqsumi.

19. Many government ministers and other GOK officials also host diwaniyas as part of their performance of their official duties. Since the May 16 decision to grant women full political rights, more women have announced the formation of diwaniyas. (Note: Most diwaniya hosts and guests are men. Traditionally, outside of mixed diwaniyas, there is little mixing of the sexes. Female Emboffs have been welcomed at several diwaniyas, but only when the host has given permission. It is not unusual for some men to leave the diwaniya when female Emboffs enter. Some women do host diwaniyas, usually during the day and they tend to be more social in nature. Local attorney Badria Al-Awwadi, however, hosts a weekly breakfast diwaniya with a focus on environmental issues and women's rights. End note.)

Nothing Can Stop a Diwaniya

110. For those Kuwaitis who remained in Kuwait during the 1990-91 Gulf War and Iraqi occupation, the diwaniya had a very special role. It was a place for organizing acts of resistance and providing services to citizens. After liberation, the diwaniya remained a venue for consultations on the future political situation in the absence of formal, government political institutions.

111. For almost 250 years, Kuwait has maintained the diwaniya as an important cultural characteristic, passing it down from generation to generation. Over time, it has changed from a meeting place for the ruler and the ruled and an institution open to only the wealthy, to an integral part of Kuwaiti society. It takes many forms: it is a venue for conveying opinions and exchanging informal talks, and a place for relaxing with friends, a mini-parliament. For EmbOffs, it is an important source of information, a place to make and maintain contacts, and an important venue for explaining U.S. foreign policy to a diverse audience. In post's view, and certainly that of most Kuwaitis, the diwaniya is what really distinguishes Kuwaiti society from that of its neighbors.

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